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TAGS: PREL PGOV PBTS ASEC MASS PINS PTER PHUM SNAR UZ
SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: STAFFDEL MEETS WITH MINISTRY OF DEFENSE

CLASSIFIED BY: PROHASKA, STEVEN N.; (B), (D)

1. (C) Summary: During a meeting with Colonel Rustamov of Uzbekistan's Ministry of Defense on December 15, House Foreign Affairs Committee staffers discussed a range of defense and security issues. Rustamov voiced support of international efforts to promote stability in Afghanistan and was pleased that bilateral military cooperation is growing. He identified problems with Uzbekistan's ability to guard certain borders against terrorist incursions due to mountainous terrain, and cited further training for Uzbekistan's Air Force, Air Defense Forces, infantry, and medical units as priorities for bilateral cooperation. Further bilateral military and security cooperation may yield benefits in fostering pro-Western sentiment, raising awareness of human rights among members of the Ministry of Defense, and shaping the reform of Uzbekistan's armed forces. End summary.

2. (C) On December 15, House Foreign Affairs Committee staffers Brent Wolfork and Taylor Morgan and Embos discussed a range of defense and security issues with Chief of the International Relations Department Colonel Farkhod Rustamov and Captain Engalichev from Uzbekistan's Ministry of Defense. Colonel Rustamov gave a short overview of bilateral military cooperation, noting that this began in 1995 and that both sides have worked out a plan for 34 military training events to take place in 2009. Despite a period when the bilateral relationship deteriorated, military cooperation has increased since 2005.

Supportive of Efforts in Afghanistan

3. (C) In response to a question about Uzbekistan's role in stabilizing Afghanistan, Colonel Rustamov stated that Uzbekistan supports United Nations resolutions on the situation in Afghanistan. He lamented that Afghanistan is a source of problems including terrorism, extremism, and drug trafficking that impacts the entire Central Asian region. Rustamov asserted that Uzbekistan will support the efforts of the international community, including the United States, to maintain peace and stability in the region and will provide logistical support for troops serving in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has discussed non-military shipments with Transportation Command and supports overflight rights for commercially contracted DOD aircraft. (Note: The Ministry of Defense recently informed Post via diplomatic note that it has renewed, effective November 16, overflights for NATO forces on a case-by-case basis. End note.)

Views of Terrorism, Border Security

4. (C) When asked about MOD efforts with regard to combating terrorism, Rustamov replied that the Ministry is not really responsible for counterterrorism. It is involved in counternarcotics, however, and terrorism and narcotics are interrelated issues because the drug trade can finance terrorist activity. He said that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has been renamed the Islamic Movement of Turkestan and is affiliated with al-Qaida. Moreover, it receives support from ungoverned areas in Afghanistan and in Pakistan. Rustamov asserted that terrorists favor routes to Uzbekistan through remote mountainous areas, which are especially difficult for Uzbekistan to control. (Comment: Probably a reference to Uzbekistan's eastern borders with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. End comment.) The small part of Uzbekistan's border with Afghanistan is strictly controlled, however. Rustamov said that U.S. technical assistance to better guard the mountainous parts of Uzbekistan's borders would be helpful. (Comment: MOD recently approached the Defense Attache Office asking for information on UAVs. Defense Attache Office is exploring what technologies might be available to meet MOD needs short of offering UAVs, such as pole-mounted cameras and dirigibles. End comment.)

Priority Areas for Defense Cooperation

15. (C) Rustamov identified training as a priority issue for Uzbekistan's Armed Forces in cooperation with the United States, particularly for the Air Force, Air Defense Forces, infantry, and medical units. He spoke of devoting more attention to modeling and simulation to better train pilots for transport aircraft, and noted that the planned 34 bilateral training events reflect these priorities.

Views of SCO, CSTO

16. (C) In response to a question about Uzbekistan's views of military cooperation with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Rustamov said that Uzbekistan joined the SCO because of its interest in addressing border security issues under the auspices of that organization. Tashkent also now hosts the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. "How can I put this nicely?" he continued. "Uzbekistan does not support military cooperation with that organization." Uzbekistan only observes SCO military exercises. "I believe we'll maintain this in the future," he said.

17. (C) When asked about MOD views of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Rustamov stated that Uzbekistan rejoined the CSTO as a direct result of the events in May 2005. (Note: A reference to the tragedy in Andijon. End note.) "Our only purpose in doing so was to combat terrorism," he said. Uzbekistan's interest in combating terrorism has guided its interaction with the organization. With the exception of the CSTO's counterterrorism exercises, Uzbekistan participates only as an observer in the organization's activities. (Comment: Despite rumors of Uzbekistan's planned withdrawal from the organization, Rustamov gave no indication that such plans exist. An Uzbek representative to the CSTO, Zakir Zaitov, also told Poloff recently that he expected to serve in his position until 2011. However, Deputy Minister of Defense Rustam Niyazov recently told the Ambassador that Uzbekistan would not take part in any CSTO-related effort to form "peacekeeping" units, noting that there were no resources to support this. End comment.)

Military Reform

18. (C) Uzbekistan is making progress in its reform of the armed forces, Rustamov continued. Uzbekistan has emulated the United States military in developing its NCOs and pursuing contract service for some of its troops. Roughly 10 percent of Uzbekistan's armed forces now serve on a contract basis. (Comment: This figure surprises us, as we had believed the percentage of contract troops to be much higher. The Russian Defense Attache recently told the Defense Attache Office the percentage was closer to 60-70 percent contract, which could reflect an ultimate goal. End comment.) The total size of Uzbekistan's armed forces now stands at 48,000, Rustamov continued. Every district in Uzbekistan has a Ministry of Defense school which teaches a six-month training program for those who work on technical issues. Uzbekistan also is giving attention to housing for its troops, and the GOU is buying apartments and houses for soldiers with families. He noted that military service is considered to be very prestigious in Uzbekistan, and that the successes they have enjoyed are due to the attention of President Karimov.

Hoping to Further Develop Defense Cooperation

19. (C) In response to an invitation to send a message to Congress, Rustamov thanked the staffers for their interest and for visiting, and said it would be useful to have further meetings like this to maintain the bilateral dialogue, particularly before the U.S. considers pursuing sanctions or other "hard measures." He waxed nostalgic about the times when over 100 bilateral military events took place annually, and praised the good cooperation that had taken place under the International Military Educational Training program before it was frozen in 2004. He expressed hope that this and other security cooperation could resume.

Comment:

10. (C) Many of Rustamov's comments track with what we have heard from GOU officials in the past. In addition to the enhanced capabilities that military cooperation brings to the armed forces of Uzbekistan, military and security cooperation with Uzbekistan may foster pro-Western sentiment among the next generation of military leaders in the country as well as develop Uzbekistan's awareness of human rights issues, as these modules are often included in Western military training programs.

NORLAND

To view the entire SMART message, go to URL http://repository.state.sgov.gov/_layouts/OSS/SearchResults.aspx?k=messageid:2fa64351-7402-4c77-87